Course: SOC 1301
Instructor: Richey

Sociological Imagination Handout

Sociological Imagination: a quality of mind that attempts to look at a situation as if for the first time to try to fully understand what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves.

Example: Let us look at the world of fashion using our sociological imagination.

Mill's 3 Questions: Those who use the sociological imagination have consistently asked three sorts of questions:

1. What is the structure of this particular phenomenon as a whole and how does it fit within the current structure of society?
2. Where does this phenomenon stand in human history?
3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this phenomenon and in this period?

Example: Let us look at Mill's 3 questions and use them to examine the world of fashion.

1. What is the structure of this particular phenomenon as a whole and how does it fit within the current structure of society? **There are two parts to the fashion industry, that of "high fashion" and that of "consumer fashion." High fashion is what the top designers create and show on runways and can only be afforded by the very wealthy. Consumer fashion attempts to make mass market productions that are more wearable and affordable for everyday people. Our society is capitalistic and very focused on the importance on wealth, so fashion provides an outward display of wealth for an individual.**
2. Where does this phenomenon stand in human history? **We are in a point of history that does not pride itself on tradition, but on innovation. This impacts the fashion industry because it encourages designers to design new and innovative fashions. We are also in a hyper-sexualized point in history where "sex sells" which also influences designers.**
3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this phenomenon and in this period? **Currently, celebrities are the most public figures in this point of history and in many way, what they choose to wear influences style amongst the general populations. The fashion industry certainly caters to celebrities in order to gain creditability and status.**

The sociological imagination makes a distinction between 'the personal troubles of individuals' and 'the public issues of a social structure.'

- **Troubles:** occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others.
- **Issues:** have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life.

Example: Let us look at the distinction between troubles and issues in regards to the world of fashion.

- **Troubles:** **An individual's choice of what to and not to buy/wear based on their personal preferences and their body type.**
- **Issues:** **Current fashion trends, what colors are in style this season, what fabrics are in style this season, etc.**

Source: Conley, D. (2008). *You may ask yourself: An introduction to thinking like a sociologist.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Social Institution: Any institution in a society that works to socialize the groups or people within it.

Social Identity: How individuals define themselves in relationship to the groups with which they affiliate (or disassociate from).

Example: How do these two terms relate to the fashion industry?

- **Social Institution:** **The fashion industry does work to socialize people into knowing what is appropriate to wear in certain circumstances as well as what is in or not in fashion.**
- **Social Identity:** **The fashion industry is often used by individuals to show their personal identity/style and/or their affiliation an identity group.**

Microsociology: seeks to understand local interactional contexts; its methods of choice are ethnographic, generally including participant observation and in-depth interviews.

Macrosociology: generally concerned with social dynamics at a higher level of analysis - that is, across the breadth of a society.

Example: How could you examine the fashion industry from both a micro and macro sociology perspective?

- **Microsociology:** **How does fashion impact individual interactions? It allows us to make assumptions about individuals before we even talk to them.**
- **Macrosociology:** **There are many different larger social structures that influence and are influenced by fashion. Fashion is usually the first to push the boundaries of "decency" in regards to dress and is influenced by the morality of a given time period. It also has a lot to do with creating a visual display of one's status, and is often used as a tool of the privilege to demonstrate their privilege as well as oppress those who do not**

Three Main Sociological Perspectives:

- **Functionalism (Macro):** the theory that various social institutions and processes in society exist to serve some important (or necessary) function to keep society running. Functions may be:
  - Manifest (explicit)
  - Latent (hidden)
- **Conflict Theory (Macro):** inequality exists as a result of political struggles among different groups in a particular society.
- **Symbolic Interactionism (Micro):** a micro-level theory in which shared meanings, orientations, and assumptions form the basic motivation behind people's actions.

Example: How could you examine the fashion industry from these three different perspectives?

- **Functionalism:** **The fashion serves an important role in society by serving as a means of identification (of class, job, age, etc.) which helps society keep running. These are both manifest/explicit, in the forms of dress codes, or latent/hidden in the form of judgments made by people on others based on style.**
- **Conflict Theory:** **Conflict both keeps the fashion industry move forward through competition to be the "best" designer and the most innovative. Fashion also aids in other social conflicts through identification of status.**
- **Symbolic Interactionism:** **Fashion provides a lot of shared meaning that allows us to make assumptions about individuals and know how to appropriately interact with them.**